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Abstract: The fear of missing the mark often shapes how honors students approach risk in the classroom and, consequently, how instructors build risk-taking exercises into their curriculums. This paper explores the concept of propositional risk in the context of honors pedagogy, wherein students are challenged to interrogate deeply held beliefs and tasked with exercises designed to call forth the full complexity of attendant issues surrounding any individual viewpoint. As distinct from strategic risk, which can be characterized as performative and externally motivated, propositional risk requires students to critically evaluate a spectrum of thought, value, and ideology in the context of singular, independent vantages. The author uses examples from a study abroad program and provides tips for fostering propositional tension in the classroom, suggesting that this type of risk, latent with the potential for change, is of greater benefit to the student long-term.

Keywords: risk-taking; propositional tension; dialogic teaching; self-reflection; study abroad

INTRODUCTION

In considering the types of risks students take, Cognard-Black identifies the tension among talented students between taking risks and trying to avoid the consequences of failure, whether personal tension or more measurable consequences such as grades. This second type of tension—between the risk of an action and its potential result—is characteristic of what is called strategic risk. While encouraging students to engage in strategic risk can be

desirable in honors pedagogy, the performative nature of this risk often yields temporary results rather than lasting changes in the student's thought and action. Instead, honors educators should create an environment that fosters propositional risk, a more meaningful and lasting type of intellectual risk-taking behavior.

STRATEGIC RISK IN HONORS

The type of risk typically associated with honors students is often characterized as daring, almost rebellious in nature. This type of risk is largely bound to the classroom and particularly challenges traditional or orthodox ways of learning. For example, a student may opt to create a performance or mixed media project instead of an essay or perhaps will adopt a surprising confrontational stance on an issue debated in class. Many high-achieving students have been conditioned to deliver their work in original ways, so by the time they reach college they are fully trained in a performative game of cat and mouse that is daring but at the same time expected by their peers and instructors.

In many cases, educators encourage these behaviors because we want our students to embrace creativity. We want them to think deeply and broadly about the problems that face our society and to be creative in the ways they apply their training to generating solutions. We hope that their willingness to confront the norms of higher education will later translate into a willingness to confront the systems and structures that impede the advancement of society. However, when our student learning outcomes for a course begin to steer our students toward this type of performative strategic risk, we may do a disservice by overlooking a more foundational type of risk, the risk of personal struggle.

A CRITIQUE OF PERFORMATIVE STRATEGIC RISK

What I have called performative strategic risk is, at its roots, situational or contextual; it often takes place when students feel it is appropriate to engage in risk-taking behaviors. This feeling may be based on the course, the curriculum, the way grades are managed, and the students' standing within the course in relation to the instructor and their peers. In other words, before engaging in risk-taking behaviors in the classroom, a student conducts an internal risk-reward analysis to determine the suitability of risk. This type of risk is entirely strategic in that the determining factor is whether the potential for reward outweighs the potential negative consequences of the action.

The honors demographic of high-achieving students has been conditioned to seek the highest grade possible and typically deems anything short of a top mark as a failure. The fear of missing the mark shapes how honors students approach risk in the classroom. As educators, we should be suspicious of construing this type of risk-taking as desirable. After all, our goal is not that our students take on risk only when the probability of reward is in their favor. While a keenly developed sense of this type of risk-reward approach may carry over into certain career fields, this type of behavior does not create conditions for improving how students engage in authentic intellectual risk beyond the walls of the classroom.

Typically, the situational nature and external motivation of strategic risk yield a temporary result. No lasting effects of this risk beyond the assignment created and the grade recorded may exist. As far as the individual goes, very little change that takes place internally may occur. We are not making our students better people when we encourage this risk. We are conditioning students to become people who make sound bets. Instead, our classrooms should be an environment where students are asked to engage in a conversation with themselves and come to decisions through personal struggle.

PROPOSITIONAL RISK

I propose that the more valuable type of risk in honors education is what I call "propositional risk." Students exercise propositional risk when they are willing to interrogate deeply held beliefs and to immerse themselves in the full complexity of attendant issues in order to refine or substantially alter their views. In this type of risk, students must examine a fact, a statement, or worldview and personally evaluate its validity in the context of their own worldviews. Propositional risk does not merely require that a student take a controversial view of a topic; rather, it occurs when a student is able to consider that viewpoint openly and critically, with a willingness to acknowledge that it could be as viable as their own. This kind of risk brings about change in a student's worldview.

The challenge of propositional risk is that it is internally motivated: there is no performance to give and no reward to be received. The process of changing or nuancing a viewpoint rarely provides a visible signal for the world. Despite the lack of quantifiable output for the purposes of a grade, a student's willingness to engage in propositional risk may be one of the greatest factors affecting his or her potential intellectual development.

PROPOSITIONAL RISK IN CONTEXT: STUDY ABROAD

As a study abroad educator, I have made propositional risk an important part of the student learning outcomes related to cultural engagement. Every summer I take a team of undergraduate researchers to Israel to participate in an archaeological excavation. Over the course of their trip, the students spend three weeks working and living with students from around the world, including Israeli undergraduates, most of whom have completed their mandatory military service in the Israel Defense Forces. On the weekends, the same study abroad participants stay in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. This context is an ideal training ground for students to encounter propositional risk organically.

The majority of my students who study in Israel are from midwestern or southern states. Typically, they are familiar with what they perceive to be Christianity, which may be described more accurately as Western Evangelical Christianity. Their time in Jerusalem exposes them to Orthodox traditions with extravagant churches, icons, and fully developed liturgies. For a number of students, this trip will mark their first visit to a Catholic church. Often, this exposure to new and wildly different implementations of Christianity—not to mention the Christian inhabitants of Jerusalem themselves—comes as a shock to students. Every year the students meet Zak, a Palestinian Christian who owns a shop in the Old City. Many students find it hard to conceptualize that an Arab man is Christian and not Muslim. They are even more puzzled to hear from Zak about the hardships that Christians endure in the West Bank and the ways the Church must function given these challenges. Suddenly, their tidy version of Christianity looks very different, and their uneasy encounter with a worldview that most resembles their own faith happens as they also confront two other major religions for the first time.

Unfortunately, many students today relate to Islam through the narratives of Islamic extremism that have dominated national conversation since their birth. At the same time, few of our southern and midwestern students have actually known someone who is Jewish. In the span of three weeks, living, eating, sleeping, working, and playing with these new Israeli friends—while on the weekends sitting in the shops of Palestinian Muslims who are also new friends—presents a tension between two new realities that confront students with propositional risk. They are challenged to resolve the tension between their own experiences with these people and the many competing narratives they have received up to this point in their lives. Under most circumstances,

their decisions may never be presented to a group, discussed in class, or defended in a written response. They have little external motivation in the form of a grade to force them to declare a stance. Instructors and peers will never gasp at their bravery. Only in the dichotomy of multiple real and valid positions do the students sense an urgency to resolve the tension. Despite the unseen nature of this personal struggle, these contemplations have the potential to change the student in meaningful and lasting ways if they are willing to do the work of confronting the tension.

FOSTERING PROPOSITIONAL RISK

To foster this type of values-based intellectual risk in the honors classroom, I offer the following suggestions, drawing from my example of study abroad.

Students Must Know Their Own Position

Many of our students have never been required to take a stand on the types of issues we encounter in the seminar room. They frequently understand the facets of a debate, but a significant portion have lived with the privilege of never needing to confront and act on the data in a conclusive manner. In their minds, they are observers or neutral parties, not participants in the debate under study. For these students, new facts become part of a larger data set rather than registering as incongruous with a personal conviction. Without incongruity, there can be no tension and consequently little impetus for urgency on the part of the student.

Knowledge of facts is not enough if a student is to enter a position of propositional risk. Students need to be able to articulate the facts that they know and make a declaration of their position in the discussion. When students say they do not know or cannot come to a conclusion, they must be able to articulate why they do not know. For students to encounter a new proposition that poses a risk to their own view, they must first take a personal inventory to be certain of their own position.

Students Must Encounter the Proposition in a Real and Meaningful Way

Study abroad offers an immersive experience in which students are removed from their own contexts and placed into situations entirely different. They are thrown into the deep end of cultural engagement, and suddenly

every experience—from doing laundry to using public transportation—takes place in a matrix comparing the new experience with what is known. While washing laundry seems insignificant, a student can hardly make an informed assessment without experiencing other methods of doing laundry. The immersive experiences of overseas programs force a student to come to terms with new alternative viewpoints as real and viable options.

Encountering propositional tension in such a way encourages urgent resolution in a manner that makes new experiences appear as conceivable and valid as a student's previously held assumptions. In my study abroad course, the experience of engaging with Israelis and Palestinians in such a short time span creates an urgency on the part of the student. In the example of doing laundry, students have no option but to wash their clothes using the new local methods.

To recreate this kind of propositional tension in the honors classroom, the instructor must immerse students in the issues. While articles and lectures can move a student toward understanding an issue in an academic sense, we owe it to our students to bring them as close to the issues as possible. In my courses, I have achieved this goal through visits to contested monuments, in-class Skype interviews with people from around the world, and the use of the extensive oral history archives at the University of Kentucky. More than ever before, our unprecedented access to technology and the widespread support for experiential learning on our campuses is making it possible to present ideas and issues to our students in ways that move them from the abstract to concrete.

Students Must Be Encouraged to Engage in Propositional Risk

A guiding narrative about the intended outcomes of a single activity or entire course can have profound effects on the final results. For example, when I teach my course on the history of Jerusalem, I make it clear from the first day of class that I expect students to confront their own views of the history and politics of Jerusalem. The course begins with a short reflection exercise so the students can articulate what they know about Jerusalem and its politics and where these views come from. At the end of the semester they receive a very similar prompt to see how their thinking has changed. Throughout the semester, I reinforce the intended outcome of the class that students will evaluate their own positions and those presented in class, then drawing conclusions in these areas.

CONCLUSION

I conclude with the words of James H. Robertson (1966) invoked in the essay convening this forum:

> Specifically, the abler students want to be involved in a meaningful dialogue with their instructor, their peers, and with themselves; they want to be "threatened," i.e., compelled to question and to reexamine. (p. 54)

Robertson rightly suggests that meaningful dialogue in the honors classroom requires not only a conversation between peers and instructors but a conversation with one's self. His call to question and reexamine is not for the sake of intellectual jousting around the seminar table but for creating a context in which threats to one's views and values provide true and meaningful learning. As honors educators, our mission is not to encourage performative strategic risk in some sort of academic casino game but to compel our students to do the difficult work that comes with confronting new and challenging viewpoints.

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